Welcome to Wonderland

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Welcome to Wonderland

by mousehound

Summary

Will Graham took a job as a security guard at Wonderland Mall because nowhere else would hire an empath after the mess he made in New Orleans, but an easy pay check is out of the question when girls are going missing and management doesn't want to upset the careful balance between the creatures and humans that make their living in Wonderland. That doesn't explain why their newest restaurateur has taken so much interest in Will, or his case. Just who, and what, is Hannibal Lector?

A Meeting

It was a dreary Saturday evening when Will rolled his slightly worse for wear Toyota through the employee gates to Wonderland Mall. A small storm that had been bidding its time at the barrier, building from a gentle drizzle to a hard downpour, rolled right in with him and lightening crackled across the sky as it went.

Will didn't pay it any mind as he turned down the parking ramp. Things like that just happened around the Mall, and after six months working security he was pretty sure he'd become immune to the shock factor.

Mall employees had assigned parking in the deepest bowls of the underground garage, a row of brightly lit spaces that backed onto a heavy white door where flaking black letters spelled out the word 'Private – Employees Only'. A large code pad on the left wall blinked steadily with an angry red glare as Will jumped from his car but he ignored it and placed his palm over a worn patch of wall just below, his skin tingling as the concealed sensor jumped to life and the door audibly released. Will might have questioned the need for subterfuge and misdirection bordering on paranoia when he first started, now it was second nature.

Not everyone, or everything, in Wonderland played by the rules and it was a lesson that the security team took very seriously.

"Hey, Graham, what's the deal man? You're like, an hour early. Finally time to pop that shopping cherry?" Beverly called out as he passed the CCTV hub. She was one of the day shift camera jockeys and claimed to have nearly fifteen years of service under her belt, dating all the way back to the Mall's grand opening, or so she said. Will thought he might believe her. There was an ageless oddity about her that Will associated with anyone that spent too much time around Wonderland. Even in the blue tinged light of twelve video screens her skin looked smooth, her dark hair braided into two tight rows as a nod to the rave kid she'd once been, and her eyes lined electric pink.

"No, just a lot of paperwork from that theft at Knocker Man's," he replied. "Kobolds don't play well with others when they find out someone is stealing from them."

Beverly flashed him a smile that was all white teeth and sharp edges. "Let me know if you need any of my special recordings," she said, and Will was a little relieved to be able to shake his head and tell her one of the other operators pulled it already.

He liked Beverly, and it was rare that he liked anybody, but there was a strange electric static that hovered in the air around her and unnerved him sometimes. As if she was more pixel than person, he thought, as he shuffled into the men's locker room and changed into his uniform. Most people broadcast their emotions to a greater or lesser extent but Beverly was a noisy buzz that itched behind Will's eyeballs, like a broken television stuck between channels. It gave him a headache at the best of times and he was careful to avoid the corridor past the CCTV room when he went to start his paperwork.

He found the door to the security office sat slightly ajar, as it always was when occupied. The room was moderately sized but so jammed with old steel desks, computers, wires and cabinets that the air conditioning could hardly keep the space bearably cool, and so by unspoken agreement the door was only ever shut when the place was empty. A stress ball streaked past Will's head as he stepped inside and he swore, jumping back as it bounced from the wall and back again.

"Oh shit! My bad Graham, wasn't expecting anyone else in early," Zeller, one of Will's fellow security officers called, half falling from his chair in his efforts to catch the ball and apologise at the same time.

"It happens," Will replied and tried to make sure his smile didn't look too much like a grimace. He could already feel a headache building in his temples. "New stress balls again?" he asked, nodding to the box.

"Yeah, still no sign of the missing girls," Zeller said, as if that was sufficient explanation. But in a strange way it was, apparently Mall management believed very strongly in stress release so long as it involved a silicon ball. Every time an 'incident' was deemed sufficiently serious a parcel would arrive filled with new ones to distribute. Will had seven in his drawer already and it made him wonder just who was running HR. The Mall operated a strict human only policy when it came to employees but Will was proof enough that human didn't always mean normal.

With a nod he took out the incident file on the Knocker Man's theft and had just begun checking Mr Modig's statement when Jack Crawford strode into the room, bringing a wave of angry energy with him. "Graham," he snapped, "with me."

Will felt himself bristle at the tone but pushed back his irritation and followed, avoiding Zeller's curious gaze.

"You seem to have settled into my team the past few months," Crawford said, aggression thinly veneered with an affable smile as he led Will towards his private office and waved for him to sit down. Will was barely familiar with Crawford, they'd met very briefly during Will's orientation, but it wasn't a surprise that Jack had followed his integration into Mall security. Jack Crawford wore his dominance over the security unit like an old coat, familiar and comfortable, and Will had no doubt at all that Jack knew everything he considered to be important about anyone.

"Yes," Will replied.

Crawford's smile took a sharper cast and he made a show of seating himself behind a broad, dark wood desk, fingers steepled beneath his chin while he examined Will in the stretching silence. It was meant to unsettle him, Will knew, but despite the knowledge he felt himself tense, his eyes sliding to stacks of paper, the walls, the ceiling, his clenched hands. Anywhere but Crawford's face.

"I'll admit to some disappointment that you haven't seen fit to make more use of your gifts."

Will startled and Jack's gaze finally caught him. "Yes, I'm well aware that you have a – what's the word I'm looking for? An empathy?" Crawford said. "In fact it's part of the reason I hired you."

Dizzy from the onslaught of Jack – anger, triumph, cunning, pity – Will forced his eyes down to the floor. When he spoke it was in stumbling words, spit through clenched teeth. "There are others you could have- " he paused, "if you know about my disorder, then you know-"

"About the incident in New Orleans?" Crawford interrupted, "I do, your references were quite blunt."

Will just bet they were, people liked talking about fuck ups when they weren't their own. He snorted, tired of Jack's game, of feeling the man's satisfaction at playing Will on a puppet string, and slumped back in his seat. "What do you want from me?"

"This," Jack leant across the desk, presenting a thin beige folder. Inside Will found a set of photographs, four girls smiling up at him with their names, ages and last locations scribbled across the bottom, as if that was all that mattered about them anymore.

"When did the fourth go missing?" he asked, surprised by how steady his voice sounded.

"This morning," Jack replied, "and management are concerned. We get a few runaways that use the Mall as their chance to pick up a ride every year, but not in these numbers. Now it's four in a month, and none of them fit the usual profile; these girls were shopping with friends and family, having fun, catching a movie. Then they're just gone, we can't even find them in the camera footage."

It struck Will just how similar they all looked, not just young and pretty, but the angle of their chins, the blue of their eyes. "Why hasn't anyone called in the police?" he asked, the answer seemed obvious, but he wanted to hear Jack say the words."You and I both know that Wonderland is neutral territory; no police, no agencies, just us," Jack said, "and if our patrons are at risk then we have absolute authority to investigate. The management board will deal with our findings."

Will nodded. It sounded about right. And wasn't that just what a washed up homicide detective with a black mark on his record wanted? A place where his skills could be put to use without all the mess of people and politics getting in the way, a place where he didn't have to pretend to be normal. Jack, apparently interpreting Will's silence as hesitation, stood from his desk and took another piece of paper from his cabinet, offering it without hesitation. A new contract, Will blinked at the salary and hours and felt the curl of confidence that Crawford exuded. "For your new position in the team."

"For my mind, you mean," Will replied, but took the paper anyway.

Jack chuckled slightly but didn't deny it, and held out his palm, grip almost painful around Will's fingers when he returned the gesture. "Then you start straight away, hand off whatever you're working on, I expect you in the Level C food court in thirty minutes."

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Despite the weekend crowds, Level C was still fairly quiet as Will made his way past the store fronts, the switch over between those who came for daytime shopping and the night visitors not yet in full swing. At not quite five thirty, it was both too early and too late, he supposed.

There was no sign of Crawford in the food court when he arrived, instead Will was greeted by the sight of a familiar young man lunging at a girl in one of the stall queues. He began to run almost before he heard the shriek, hand grasping at his belt for a weapon. The girl screamed again, her food tray turned to a shield as Will slammed into her attacker, rubber soles of his boots squealing under the strain to hold back Matt Brown when the bloodsucker wheeled on him.

“Step back Matthew or get sprayed, this is your only warning!” Will growled, the tip of his service baton pressed firmly into the young vampire’s chest as his free hand unclipped the bottle from his belt holster. Matt hissed in response but the angry red in his eyes faded a little as he glanced at the canister. A quick misting of silver nitrate wouldn’t do any lasting harm but, to hear a vamp tell, it hurt like bitch and meant days of skin peeling and rinse downs to recover.

“You should spray him anyway! I’ve got a right to shop here without getting harassed by some feeder with a machismo complex!” Matt’s victim shouted. She had the appearance of a young woman but it was almost impossible to tell species by sight alone, most visitors to the Wonderland Mall came dressed in their human guises. Will was betting on succubus though, the demi-humans were practically catnip to a vampire as young and uncontrolled as Matthew Brown.

This was why Will despised the night shifts. Bloodsuckers everywhere and they were always on edge, like junkies itching for their next fix. The emotion scratched at the periphery of Will’s brain until he barely had the patience to walk his beat, let alone deal with food court attacks. “No one is getting sprayed if Matthew calms down and comes back to the security office,” said Will and raised the bottle to face height when it seemed like the vampire might decide to push his luck. “Ten minute cool down and I won’t even need to call Mr Chiltern.”

It would be a lie to say the little thrill of apprehension that bled from Matthew didn’t bring Will some measure of satisfaction. Frederick Chiltern kept the undead on a tight leash when it came to accessing the Mall. Brown was a minor troublemaker who’d passed below the radar so far, but he took harassment reports seriously and Will doubted Matthew wanted a permanent ban on his record. It was tough to get fresh human blood legally outside of neutral grounds like the Mall, where everything could be bought or sold somewhere.

“Yeah, sure man, whatever,” Matthew said, his shoulders still tense but the bloodlust seemed to be fading. He accepted the prod Will sent his way towards a service door marked ‘Private’ and shuffled in the general direction while Will took a minute to placate the angry succubus and stow his weapons. “If you’d like to make a statement about what occurred just now then come by the station office on level 1 before you head home today, otherwise feel free to write it up and email a copy over.”

He offered a card with the station contact details and his name emblazoned across the middle but she rolled her eyes and waved it away. “Bloodsucker is an asshole but as long as he

doesn't come near me again then I don't care what you do with him."

Will could appreciate the sentiment and wished her a good evening in what he hoped was a pleasant voice, but it was difficult to tell when he was so tired. His veneer of respectable calm felt tissue paper thin under the onslaught of sleepless days and the gnawing, greedy, covetous hunger of Matthew Brown.

"That was well handled."

Will started and turned to find himself facing a tall, dark eyed man with a carefully styled flop of ash brown hair and a suit that looked like it cost more than a lowly security officer, even one with a recent promotion, made in year. He exuded confidence but the emotion felt strange to Will, hollow somehow, and Will almost decided to dislike him on principle.

"Excuse me sir?"

A slight smile twisted the man's wide mouth. "My pardon, I seem to have forgotten my manners in the excitement," he replied, voice cultured and lightly accented. "Dr Hannibal Lecter at your service."

"Will Graham, Dr Lecter," Will said, and ignored both the hand the Lecter offered and the eye contact the man sought. Lecter let his hand drop but his smile deepened. "I hope that you will call me Hannibal as we become better acquainted."

Will frowned. "And how would we become better acquainted?" he asked, puzzled by Lecter's persistence. The doctor continued his subtle smile and gestured to a small storefront, one Will would have sworn blind had be vacant just the day before. But the whitewash and boards had vanished, replaced with tinted glass and a deep maroon sign emblazoned with a stags head and nothing more. "Perhaps you might join me for dinner?"

A curl of a dark emotion spread through the projection of confidence Lecter wore about his person, something that Will couldn't place but left him with the sensation he was holding a tiger by the tail.

"I have a… sense I might not approve of the menu," he replied after a moment and was rewarded with a nod of approval.

"I confess, my feasts are not for every palate, but I believe this is a challenge I would be most happy to accept," Lecter said, "perhaps we could –"

"Dr Lecter," Jack Crawford's voice boomed from across the floor as he strode from the private security entrance, "I see you're already meeting the security team, Officer Graham here is one of our newer recruits but brings his own special talents."

Lecter tilted his head in acknowledgement but his eyes remained fixed on Will, who was both relieved and disappointed by Jack's arrival.

"Will, Dr Lecter here is a remarkably talented chef," Jack said, "why, the management board must have sent requests just about every month for a restaurant in Wonderland."

“You flatter me, Jack, I’m sure it was not more than two or three letters,” Lecter replied. His attention finally shifted to Jack, and Will thought his smile took on a slightly false twist. “Whether they have accounted for the occasional disturbance my presence will bring amongst the lower species is another matter entirely of course, but we shall see in time I am sure.”

Lower species? Will was fairly confident he’d heard a majority of the slurs and slang the many beings that made use of Wonderland Mall, but never the expression ‘lower species’. His confusion must have been visible, and Lecter paused briefly. “It seems must apologise again, Officer Graham, I refer of course to the lesser fey. Pixies, kelpies, sprits and the ilk.”

Unsure how to respond, Will simply nodded and swallowed his questions, happy to let Jack continue his pleasantries with Dr Lecter for a few more minutes. He knew objectively that lesser fey were viewed as prey animals by a number of other creatures but this was the first time he’d considered the idea that there could very well be a restaurant that included them on the menu. And really, how different was it to the vamps buying human blood? Still, it left Will wondering, just what was Dr Lecter?

“Well, it’s been a pleasure Doctor, but Will and I have some matters to discuss. I can’t wait to let Bella know you’ve opened.”

Will snapped from his reverie at the sound of his name and found himself under examination once more. “The pleasure was mine, I’m sure,” Lecter said. “I look forward to seeing your wonderful wife again. And Officer Graham, I will think on your challenge.”

Stuttering slightly, Will was robbed of the opportunity to reply when Lecter strode away and Jack Crawford took Will’s shoulder in a tight grip.

“Let’s find somewhere with a little more privacy, Graham, and then you’re going to tell me everything Hannibal Lecter said to you before I arrived.”

An Interest

Forty minutes, that was how long Will had been forced to endure Jack's insistence that there must have been more to his conversation with Lecter. Who, it turned out, was considered a Big Deal in the non-human community. Will could practically hear the capital letters when Jack explained that he was no wiser than Will regarding Lecter's origins but the man, if he was a man, was well connected, wealthy, and very particular about his customers. A regular mystery, and one Will was happy to ignore.

"So I avoid Dr Hannibal Lecter at all costs, unless he's connected with our missing girls, got it," he said, cutting Jack off in the midst of another interrogation about the acquaintance comment.

Crawford's teeth clicked shut with an audible snap.

"Lecter has nothing to do with the missing girls, that at least we can be sure of," he said at last, "he's been in Europe for a number of months, possibly a year - but I'll check that with Bella; my wife follows the culture pages like that crap matters. And yes, you avoid him. Management board will come down on security like a goddamned plague of locusts if he puts a bug in their ear."

"Fine, great, now what about the girls?" Will replied, tired of whatever dominance game Jack thought he was playing.

"I mean it Graham," Jack warned, but he reached for the set of folders and that was all Will cared about. It didn't take more than a moment to lay out the stacks of paperwork, a pile for each girl with the fourth noticeably thinner than rest; just a collection of photographs and two typed pages of notes.

Will scratched his fingers through the stubble on his cheeks and lent in, gazing at each picture and reaching for the place in his head where the monsters lived. There was something there, something he couldn't quite grasp. He'd noticed a similarity in their looks earlier, now he could sense there was something extra… something special. "Tell me about them," he said.

"First girl, Tara Higgins, age fourteen. Disappeared three weeks ago, shopping with friends in the daytime Mall, they went into the bathrooms on the west side of Level B and she vanished. Camera footage shows her entering the washrooms and then she isn't seen again," Jack tapped the next photograph. "Alyssa Lowell, our second vanishing girl, also fourteen. Disappeared a week later, she was on Level C having a burger with her family and got up to grab some extra napkins, she never came back and it turns out the camera in that area has a blind spot we've since fixed."

He paused and sucked his teeth slightly, a physical tell that mirrored the urgent unease which radiated from Crawford's person, before he moved to the third photograph. "This is the weirdest one."

"Weirder than a girl vanishing when she went to get a napkin?" Will asked.

“Yeah, weirder than that,” Jack said. “This one literally disappeared mid-word, and by disappeared I mean there one second then gone. Mercedes Brown, also our oldest missing girl at sixteen, was taking her first trip to the night mall with her mother four days ago. The woman swears blind they were just walking along the concourse on level B when her daughter blinked out of existence, and the cameras confirm it; girl up and vanishes between two frames. It looks like a bad cut in a movie.”

He paused and sighed when he reached the last photograph.

“This one I can’t tell you much about. Girl went missing this morning, but looks like the same MO, if you can call it that. Sarah-Jayne Lopez, turned fifteen last week, she was on a birthday pamper day with her family and some friends. They grabbed brunch at a coffee place on the east wing of Level C and that’s about as much as I can say,” Jack pushed the file towards Will, “it’s up to you to work out if she is part of this, and what the hell is going on.”

Will ignored Jack, his brain practically on fire with…something, he couldn’t pin it down yet, but he felt it looking at Sarah-Jayne’s smiling face.

“She’s one of them,” he said.

Crawford grinned, all teeth and no joy. “I think we’re going to work together just fine.”

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By midnight Will lost count of the times he’d combed through each file.

One wall of the little basement room Jack assigned him as an office was already covered in notes, the smell of marker pen almost overpowering the lingering aroma of cleaning supplies. He stared at his own cramped handwriting until it began to blur and wondered absently if it was possible to think a hole in a wall. Probably not something safe to imagine in Wonderland, where everything was possible, even vanishing girls apparently.

His stomach clenched and rumbled loudly, as if Will needed any more proof that it was time to take a break. He stood and stretched out the strain of hours spent at a cramped desk, his back popping with relief. Coffee seemed like a good idea, maybe a donut too if there were any available in the break room. Will couldn’t recall his last meal and had a momentary suspicion that it too had been a coffee and donut from his previous shift, shrugging mentally as he made his way through the maze of halls.

The next step in his investigation was to visit the scenes of the disappearances and experience taught him it was better to eat lightly, or not at all, before he used his gifts.
“Hey, didn’t know we could have visitors down here,” Zeller commented as they passed at the doorway into the breakroom. Will frowned. “Visitors? Not a lost shoplifter?” he asked, and Zeller shrugged. “I don’t know Graham, he says he’s here for you.”

Will glanced past Zeller’s shoulder. Dr Hannibal Lecter, in all his glory, sat at a worn wooden table made all the shabbier by the rich splendour of Lecter’s clothes. It should have been a ridiculous scene, the plastic chairs and faded couch at odds with a royal blue suit that

practically glowed under the fluorescent lighting. Instead Will was reminded of a king deigning to visit the peasants, aloof, comfortable and unquestioned in his domain.

Will cursed under his breath and struggled to decide whether the warm burn in his chest was irritation at the intrusion or envy at Lecter's talent for looking so at home in any surroundings. How different he was to Will, who barely felt comfortable in his own skin. It was tempting to turn around, but Will's inevitable bad luck held firm and he was spotted immediately.

"Officer Graham, I hope I am not intruding," he smiled, "I had chance to think a little on our conversation and could not rest until I made my first attempt at your challenge."

"My challenge?" Will repeated. He wondered if Crawford was already on his way to the break room, and grimaced at the reaming he was likely to receive.

"But of course," Lecter replied, "to cook something that met with your tastes, and approval." He beaconed Will to sit and began to unpack the contents of a cooler bag onto the table. Silverware, napkins, even plates were produced before the tupperware was unleashed. Will almost forgot to his anger when the rich smell of sausage, eggs, and cheese reached his nose, almost, but not quite.

"I am not a project Dr Lecter," he said. "I'm not a side show or a pet or whatever."

Eyes, so brown they almost seemed tinted red, met Will's but Lecter didn't pause in his serving. Rather, he flashed another enigmatic smile and presented his plate with a flourish. "Nothing could be further from my mind, Will – may I call you Will? – than the thought that you are a pet or a project. I do admit a certain…shall I say interest? You are so very honest Will, and so very blind to the dangers that honesty may bring, though I sense you are not to be trifled with."

Will bristled despite the flattery.

"I'm a security guard, not a cowboy, and you're shaping up to be the most dangerous thing I've encountered so far," he replied and glanced at the plate before him. "What even is this?"

"Now, now, it does not do to be rude," Lecter chided, "I have made you a protein scramble, I make the sausage and cheese myself and the eggs come from a dear friend. I am very particular about my ingredients, it is my reputation at stake when I cook after all. And please, you must call me Hannibal."

The temptation was too great not to take a bite, Will at first promising himself it would be just one, just to check it was safe, and then finding the plate already half eaten. He groaned slightly around a mouthful of sausage and it didn't take an empath to pick up on the satisfaction emanating from Lecter.

"The uh, the sausage is pretty good," he admitted finally, "spicy."

"I'm glad to have your approval." From anyone else the reply might have glib or cutting, but there seemed to be a sort of sincerity about Lecter that crept under Will's defences. He'd

decided to dislike the man on principle after their first meeting but that conviction was already wavering.

“So why now to open your restaurant?” Will found himself asking as he chased the last bite of egg with his fork. “And why Wonderland?”

Hannibal chewed thoughtfully for a moment. “A wise man would say that the figures seemed appropriate, that the management board were very persuasive. But I would not wish to be dishonest with you, Will. It was, more than anything, a sense of rightness. My kind is sometimes gifted with certain knowings, much like your own, I think.”

Will felt the hair at his nape prickle.

“Knowings?”

“Ah, perhaps I misspoke. Yours is a pure empathy, whereas my talent is little more than an occasional prediction. Perhaps I would have been better to compare it with one of those magic eight ball toys; unpredictable and vague,” Hannibal said.

“How?” Will demanded, voice sharp, “who told you? Jack?”

“I assure you, your confidence has not been betrayed,” the response was measured, cool; much like the calm satisfaction that radiated from Hannibal’s person. “I am blessed with an acute sense of smell, and empaths of your calibre have a distinct aroma, it’s difficult to miss if you have come across the scent before.”

Scent? There were things out there - hell, in here, in Wonderland- that could smell his version of weird? Will shifted uncomfortably in his seat, conscious that he hadn’t showered before his shift, that he’d come into work coated with the stale sweat of his nightmares. Jesus, he couldn’t even remember if he’d bothered with deodorant. “You can smell me?”
Hannibal, a hint of amusement creeping into his voice was quick to reply.

“Certainly, but as I said, my nose is exceptionally keen. Your talent happens to have a physical manifestation, but it is no different to me than knowing that Jack Crawford ate an apple before our encounter earlier,” he explained.

Pushing aside the idea that empaths had a specific smell, and there were enough of them out there that someone like Hannibal knew what the smell was - mostly because that was a whole extra chunk of information he wasn’t yet prepared to examine - Will ruminated on the concept of a nose that sensitive. How did someone get by in a place that was full of all kinds of people all day? Did you ever go nose blind? Was it like a sniffer dog, able to focus on certain scents and block others? An idea scratched at the edge of Will’s thoughts.

“Jack says you’re important in the non-human community,” he stated and paused. He wasn’t entirely sure how to phrase his request, the words refusing the form until he gave up entirely. “I have something I’d like you to see, to… I don’t know, explain I guess?”

“Of course, Will, however I can be of assistance.”

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The small office, which Will was increasingly convinced had been a closet, was made all the smaller by Hannibal's presence. He filled space the unconsciously, so focused on examining the notes made in Will's scrawling handwriting that he seemed to lose some of the veneer of urban humanity, and for a moment Will imagined a predator stood in his place.

"You believe the girls still live?" He asked eventually.

Will shook his head minutely. "Unlikely, the time between abductions is shrinking and the last girl was taken in clear daylight. Whoever this is, they're searching for something, someone perfect, and they're getting more desperate. The first two show signs of planning, this last one? An act of desperation, especially in Wonderland, even in the daytime mall there's plenty of beings roaming out there with the potential to foil a snatch that blatant."

"But you have yet to find any bodies?"

"No," Will replied. "But I can't say there's been any real search either."

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully and turned back to the photographs.

"Have you considered the possibility that there would be no bodies to find?" he said. "There are many amongst my brethren who will happily feast on human flesh."

Distaste crawled up Will's spine, raising the hairs at his nape as it went. He was well aware there were man eaters prowling the concourses, politely doing their shopping. Hell, he'd heard the reason management had the humans only policy for the mall staff was because there was no risk a human security guard would wind up eating a guest.

"Yeah, I'd thought about it. And if the disappearances were happening at night over a new moon I'd tell you we have a bloody bones problem," Will shrugged. "This is something different, something I'm not seeing."

He was treated to a wry smile. "And so you were determined to borrow my eyes? I'm flattered."

"Not quite," Will adjusted his glasses. "It's… more your nose actually."

Hannibal looked momentarily puzzled, then his face split into a wide, predatory grin. "Oh my dear Will, you truly are the mongoose hidden under the house. Come, let me find you a snake."

A Discovery

Of the many, many bad decisions Will had made in his life, involving Hannibal in the investigation might not turn out to be the worse. Maybe.

He tested the logic in his head, trying to square the circle; a battle between the justification of tracking down a kidnapper and potential killer against dragging an unknown and possibly dangerous fey into mall affairs. Though Will couldn't even say for certain Hannibal was fey.

Before taking the job at Wonderland, Will thought he had a good understanding of the common non-human and fey species that lived in the gaps between the bright lights and iron clad streets of human cities. It took a single shift to change his mind. Turned out the mandatory classes at the police academy didn't count for much when facing an angry leprechaun with a shoplifting record.

Over the last six months he'd learned there were hundreds of categories of non-humans, and though the fey made up a substantial amount of the various sub-species there were certainly other options. So his problem, both with Hannibal and his perp, was identification. And outside of the most common or distinct creatures, like the vampires or kobolds, it was largely impossible for a human to identify species by sight alone. Glamour, shapeshifting or simply a magic charm made it all too easy to fool human senses.

Lecter was particularly frustrating. Practically an open book when it came to certain parts of his life, describing his time in medical training at John Hopkins in surprising detail when Will escorted him to Level C, but totally avoidant on the matter of species other than vague statements regarding 'his kind'.

Will was left with only two options, empathy and research. And the first was limited until Will had time to examine the scenes without crowds of night shoppers, so he busied himself with the second.

Luckily, or perhaps pragmatically, the Wonderland Mall security office had a pretty substantial database, and an even larger library for employees looking to better understand the clientele. It was housed in a room that spanned the underbelly of the mall garage, sealed and palm-print keyed behind a small door marked 'Private'. Inside every wall was crammed with shelves where bestiaries, grimoires, diaries and a few handwritten notebooks battled for space.

It the largest collection with human access in the USA, or so Beverly claimed. She also told stories about the time when there'd been a librarian, a guy named Steve who, she said, had vanished one day while shelving a book on interdimensional curses.

The story went that the book had been found in an pawn shop after the owner went missing and was confiscated, locked up in a secure vault so the management board could have it removed from Wonderland. Then one day Steve went missing too. When the other officers came to search the library they found the curse book laid open on the floor and no one ever

found out what happened to Steve. The board decided it was safer not to hire a replacement, and instead there were warning signs on the shelves around the particularly sections.

Beverly's buzzing emotional bleed made it nearly impossible for Will to judge if she was telling the truth. But Will was at least fairly certain that at least a few of the books were written by previous employees. There was a particular title 'When to Run: A Real World Guide to Predatory Fey' that included three chapters on the use of reflective surfaces to avoid stalking species and included a few personal anecdotes that could only be describing Wonderland.

It was that book, and an armful of others, that Will liberated, somewhat tentatively at first, but when no alarm sounded after the first book was toed nervously over the doorway, he borrowed with abandon and built a new library on every available surface in his office.

Hours of reading later though, and all Will had to show for his troubles was a headache in his right temple and new fear of elm trees.

He slumped back in his chair with a sigh, scrubbed a hand across his eyes and glanced at his watch. While Will hadn't persuaded Hannibal to reveal his nature earlier, he had gained agreement to meet at 4 am on Level B and it was already a quarter to the hour. He swallowed the last cold mouthful of coffee in his mug, shrugged on his jacket and headed out onto the concourse.

The hour or so after 4am was quiet time in the Mall during the summer months, close enough to dawn that most of the night dwellers were heading home but still too early for people starting the day shifts. Perfect for discreet investigations.

Will walked quickly to avoid trading pleasantries with the vendors he passed, the few he'd gotten to know in any case, and hurried towards the female bathrooms with a few minutes to spare. Lecter was nowhere in sight.

Relieved, Will checked briefly for any onlookers. Apart from a couple of teenagers heading to the escalators and an old man reading a visitor information map, the area seemed fairly empty. Satisfied that he wasn't about to become a spectacle, Will inhaled deeply and removed his glasses.

It took a moment to focus his talent, to reach for the vague traces of Tara Higgins that still lingered after weeks of footfall. Finally he felt something reach back and the world before him tilted. Images began to overlay his vision, rewinding projections of people that seemed to both speed and slow around him until one sharpened to the form of a smiling teenage girl.

"I follower her, as I have done many times," Will intoned, letting the words flow through. "Though she does not see me or sense my presence, I am uncertain of the video cameras." He felt his feet carry him towards a niche in the wall near the bathroom entrance and continued. "I approach from the left, where the cameras are blind, and I wait. My target exits before her friends, as she always does, and I strike. She does not have time to scream or struggle, I am practiced in abduction and subdue her quickly. I leave by the same path I arrived before anyone realises she is gone."

Will followed the line of the wall and blinked as the image before him wavered slightly and something glinted in the corner.

“I do not notice I have left something behind,” he said, and knelt down, using the end of his pen to roll a small golden bell free of a crevice in the flooring. “I have my prize and will focus on nothing else until she is hidden away.”

“Got you now,” Will whispered.

“That was quite remarkable, Will.”

Will flinched, nearly falling on his ass in the process and glanced over his shoulder, but the scolding he’d been about to deliver stuck to the end of his tongue.

In the double vision Will’s empathy projected, Hannibal no longer appeared urban and aristocratic, instead he seemed wilder and far more dangerous. His frame was larger, the musculature more pronounced beneath his clothing, his skin was much darker and lit with reddish tones, and the deep brown of his eyes had become the colour of old blood. Even his hair was changed, almost black and shadowed with what Will could swear was an enormous set of antlers, though they were more suggestion than solid.

“H-Hannibal?” He stuttered, scrambling to push his glasses back onto his face and the vision was gone.

A look a faint puzzlement passed over Hannibal’s face and was quickly replaced with understanding. “Amongst my kin the eyes of a seer were once considered a delicacy,” he said, tone bland. “But I can assure you that even with my culinary skill there is little difference between one eyeball and another, perhaps apart from the size. I once attempted a course that included the eye of a giant squid. It was an extraordinary disaster.”

Will almost laughed, but bit back the urge; if he started there was a risk he might never stop. “I’m not a seer.”

Hannibal did not reply, but gave a tolerant smile and offered a hand to Will, pulling him to his feet.

“I’m not a seer,” Will repeated. It was the truth, he’d seen them on television a few times, and listened to them speak in prophetic riddles. “And that doesn’t explain what you are, which I’ve noticed you haven’t exactly been that open about so far.”

“Forgive me, I took you by surprise,” Hannibal said, ignoring both the proclamation and Will’s question. “I have never witnessed an… empath project a vision. It was fascinating, and apparently fruitful too.”

Will glanced down at the little bell and patted his pockets in search of something to bag it in. He might not carry a badge anymore, but he’d be damned if he didn’t follow at least the basics of good evidence collection.

“A moment if you please, my dear Will,” Hannibal, placed a restraining hand on Will’s shoulder, frowning at the small object. “I’d like to examine it before it is disturbed any further.”

He crouched the moment Will nodded, then lowered himself further, hands flat to the floor as he turned his head in a slow, winding pattern a few inches from the bell. It was a strange sight and Will noticed a few curious glances from passers-by that he returned with flat glares.

“You, uh, you get anything?” Will asked when Hannibal finally stood. He felt itchy and uncomfortable, his shoulder still strangely warm in the spot where Hannibal’s hand rested a few minutes before. For a few seconds his empathic sight flickered and Hannibal’s head was briefly crowned with antlers again. Will dropped his eyes and busied himself with the bell.

“Possibly. I will need to compare the other scenes,” Hannibal replied and paused before he continued. “You are not fond of eye contact.”

It was a statement, not a question, but Will couldn’t help but respond. “No, eyes are… distracting, I see too much.”

Although Hannibal hummed thoughtfully he didn’t pursue the conversation, which was a relief despite the odd silence that hung between them while Will finished bagging and tagging the evidence.

Satisfied there was nothing more to discover at the scene of Tara’s disappearance Will made the decision to move onto the second disappearance. It felt right to visit each site in order, like there was something sitting just out of sight that he would only discover if he followed the perp’s routine.

Hannibal followed at his side projecting the kind of quiet confidence Will hadn’t achieved since he was a dumb kid who thought he knew everything there was to know about life. It rubbed at Will’s nerves, already raw from a night of threats and surprises. “Why are you helping us?”

Will knew he was being unfair, being rude. But it was easier to be angry at Hannibal than to be frightened of the creature he’d glimpsed beneath Hannibal’s person suit.

“Helping you, Will.”

“Helping me, helping the Mall. It’s all the same in the end,” Will replied.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal shuffled into the elevator behind Will, suddenly very close. “Perhaps not, as I told you before, you are really very interesting. And of course as a new business owner I would not wish to see Wonderland fall into disrepute.”

“Right, of course,” Will’s throat felt suddenly dry, his palms clammy. He pushed through the elevator doors to Level C before they had even half opened, and felt Hannibal follow behind.

The food court was dimly lit, even the restaurants that catered to the night time visitors were going about the task of closing and cleaning. Will noted the stag sign that marked Hannibal’s

shop front was one of the few still glowing and passed it quickly. “Our perp took the rest of the girls from this floor, is this a little closer to home maybe?”

“You say the second girl vanished near here?” Will turned and found Hannibal examining a narrow service passage.

“Went to get some napkins and never came back, did you get something?” The passages were supposed to be heavily warded against non-humans, creating emergency retreat points for the Wonderland employees and access for the cleaning crews.

“Perhaps.”

Will frowned. “’Perhaps’?”

Hannibal hummed slightly. “There’s a scent, but it is distant, and while I could attempt to pass closer I suspect it will result in considerable discomfort.”

Will scrubbed his face with a rough hand and nodded, more to himself than to Lecter. If the perp was using the service passages then they were human.

“Ok, let me…do my thing,” he muttered. “Just give me a little space.”

He ignored the look of slight satisfaction that settled over Hannibal’s face and took a few short, steadying breathes. When Will was finally ready, he slipped off his glasses and looked for Alyssa Lowell and the perp, but what he saw was something much stranger.

An Attack

“It is 6:03 am. You are in the Wonderland Mall medical centre. Can you hear me Will?”

Will blinked. White ceiling tiles and a flickering strip light blinked back at him.

“What-?” He frowned and tried to sit up, struggling against bed sheets and helping hands.

“Everything is ok Will, here let me grab an extra pillow.” It was the first time Will had ever seen Alana Bloom, the mall medical director, looking less than perfectly put together. Her dark hair, usually glossy and styled, was pulled back into a rough ponytail and her white lab coat sat haphazardly over a rumpled shirt. Even her face was devoid of make-up, dark circles stark under the harsh lighting.

“Allow me.”

Hannibal appeared, pillow in hand. He seemed…diminished… somehow. Not tired and strained the way Alana was, but the confident glow and warm satisfaction Will expected in the man’s presence had worn to nearly a whisper, and his hands lingered on Will’s shoulders after he slid the pillow into place.

“You had me quite worried,” he said when he noticed Will’s stare. “One moment you were removing your spectacles and the next you went into a trance like state, then seized. You have been unresponsive for over an hour.”

“Dr Lecter brought you to the medical centre and the night duty nurse called me in, do you remember what happened?” Alana continued as Hannibal fell silent.

Will tried to recall the moment he’d reached for Alyssa Lowell. “Everything was red.”

He felt the look Alana and Hannibal shared as much as he saw it, and growled in frustration. “The vision, whatever it was before the – the – seizure or, I don’t know, attack I think? It was like the whole world went crimson. No food court, no mall; just rivers of blood, trees made of bone and viscera. And someone else, not our perp. Someone or something old… maybe powerful too? I don’t know, there was this rush of – of desperation, anger -”

Will winced, Hannibal’s grip on his shoulder had tightened painfully while he spoke and he pulled away sharply. “Woah, hey watch the strength, I’m still human!”

“Ok, well, that sounds awful so let’s get you checked out,” Alana said, voice bright and false.

The check-up was brusque but thorough, Will answered Alana’s questions patiently but flinched when she shone a small torch in his eyes and a thermometer in his ear. Hannibal remained at his side throughout, silent and contemplative.

“Temperature is normal,” Alana declared at last. “You’re back to your usual self as far as I can tell. Are there any similarities between the occurrence this morning and your collapse in

New Orleans?"

He shook his head mutely, refusing to revisit the memory.

"In that case I recommend you rest up for a few days, and make sure you have someone keep an eye on you. I also want you to visit a colleague of mine, who specialises in psychic repair. It may well be that the seizure was caused by a bit of overload from your particular brand of mental gift."

"If I may, Dr Bloom, I am acquainted with Bedelia Du Maurier," Hannibal interjected. "I believe she will be happy to assess Officer Graham."

Alana's eyebrows lifted, Will didn't know who Bedelia Du Maurier was but clearly he was the only one. "Wow, yes of course, Dr Du Maurier would be a great choice. I didn't realise she still saw patients."

"Just the occasional private referral."

"She sounds expensive," Will said, unreasonably irritated. "I'm a mall cop, it doesn't exactly come with a great insurance package. And I'm fine."

He clambered from the bed, ignoring Alana's protests, and Hannibal's disapproval. An embarrassed flush rose through his chest and up into his face when Will realised he'd been stripped down to his shorts and undershirt. "Where are my clothes?"

"You're going to be a tough guy, fine." Alana huffed. "I'll get your clothes, but you are going home. I'll tell Jack to have you off the roster until Tuesday, at the earliest."

Will watched her leave in surly silence. There was no way Jack Crawford would stop Will working the case and nothing Alana could do about it. He sighed and lent back against the narrow hospital cot, weary and confused. Jesus, what had he seen in Level C?

Eyes, he remembered eyes. Black and blank, soulless eyes that pounded against his mind, beat down his defences until there was nothing left but the reflection of Will's tattered brain. A swirl of dark emotions, and a ripple of fear he could almost taste. But had it been his fear? Or someone else's?

"Will?"

Will startled and found Hannibal suddenly very close, his hand braced against the back of Will's neck and eyes searching his face with an expression much like concern. Will knew better though, he could feel the anger seething below.

"Focus on me," Hannibal commanded. "I want you to tell me what I cooked for you earlier."

It was a struggle to comply, weirdly, terribly so. Panicked, Will groped for anything his senses could cling to that wasn't the bleeding, red world closing in around him. He caught a scent, light but distinctly masculine, in the air. Hannibal's aftershave perhaps? Then, like a fog lifting, the press of cool fingers against his neck suddenly seemed to become more solid,

more real. “Eggs and sausage, you called it a protein scramble. Hannibal? What’s wrong with me?”

“You’re doing very well. Now tell me what the time is, where you are, and your name,” Hannibal said.

“It’s… 6:27 am,” Will replied, he had to squint to read his watch. “I’m in Wonderland Mall and my name is Will Graham.”

“Excellent.” Hannibal’s hand relaxed, fingers sliding to Will’s jaw. It felt intimate, Will swallowed hard to wet his dry throat. He was saved from trying to make a coherent sentence when Alana walked back into the room, his clothes neatly folded over one arm. She paused at the scene, lips slightly pursed, but, didn’t make any comment as she passed him his uniform.

Will dressed in silence. Soon he and Hannibal were escorted out of the medical centre, Will biting back retorts to Alana’s directions to rest.

“What the hell is going on?” he demanded as soon as he was sure they were away from prying eyes and ears.

Hannibal hardly paused in the task of ushering Will towards one the security access doors, so close he was almost pressed against Will’s back. “You used the word ‘attack’ earlier, and I think you are correct that there was indeed some sort of attack made on your mind. It also appears likely that the damage is lingering. It attempted to overcome you once more a few minutes ago, but I was able to divert you with a common grounding technique.”

He paused very slightly before he continued, voice frank but also wary. “You expressed concern on the matter of Bedelia’s fee, tell me Will, what price do you place on your sanity?”

“Do you think I’m sane right now?” Will countered.

“Painfully so, and if that sanity is to be protected then it is vital you are seen by an expert on the matter. I have trusted Bedelia with my own mind on more than one occasion.”

It shouldn’t have been such a persuasive statement, Will still knew almost nothing about Dr Hannibal Lecter, could count their acquaintance in hours. Nonetheless his resolve waivered and died. “Would she even see me?”

Hannibal’s teeth, sharp and white, flashed behind a brief smile.

“She would for me.”

“Fine,” Will said, exhausted and more than ready for a glass of cheap liquor and the company of his dogs. “Do you have a number or her card?”

“Bedelia has retired from cohabitation,” Hannibal explained, confirming Will’s suspicion that she was likely another fey. Cohabitation, or cohab, was a term used for non-humans who chose to exist side by side with humanity, though most still maintained homes in the Realms too. Will wondered briefly about the kind of place Hannibal might live, a lavish town house in the city or a wild estate beyond human borders? “She is not available by telephone, but if

you trust me to contact her on your behalf I can arrange an appointment and your safe passage to her home?"

Did Will trust Hannibal? Maybe, maybe not. But while he might regret it later, he was too tired to care about the details.

"Sure, why the hell not. Just get a message to me through Jack," he said, then thought better of it and fished in his pocket for some paper and a pen. "Wait, scratch that, I'll give you my cell. Jack will kill me if he finds out I dragged you into this mess."

"If you prefer our discussions to be private then Jack Crawford will hear no more from me," Hannibal replied, tucking the slip of paper very deliberately into his pocket. "I wouldn't want to be the cause your demise."

Will snorted, mouth twisting into his version of a smile and waved Hannibal away.

Rest seemed like a good idea, with maybe a drink or two to keep the nightmares at bay. Luckily it was a short journey to his office, but his eyes were bloodshot in the reflection of the window in his office door, his stubble more unkempt. Will wrote up a few notes before locking up for the day, and took a creative route to the locker rooms to avoid the possibility of crossing paths with Jack.

It took the last of his energy to navigate home, the weak morning sun was blinding after a night of artificial lighting and, Will thought, probably the only thing that kept him awake on the journey. But he did make it, to his happy dogs and isolated house. By the time his watch hand passed 9 am Will was fast asleep and unaware of the way the tips of his ears had grown hot and red; a sure sign that someone, somewhere, was talking about him.

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The scrap of paper was rich with the scent of Will's skin and Hannibal inhaled it deeply. He'd refrained from the act until hidden within the privacy of his kitchen, using the edge of a clean handkerchief to lift it from his pocket and avoid further contamination. Now he savoured the distinctive musk.

Calling out to Will when he was a mere security officer with an unusual aroma had been a decision driven by impulse, Hannibal could admit that. What he could not do was regret it.

Hannibal abhorred boredom, boredom was a sign of weak imagination and lazy habits. Will Graham was anything but boring; prickly, intelligent, observant. He'd seen through Hannibal's human suit long before the glimpses granted by his empathic vision, taken note of the predator within, and still invited Hannibal to join his hunt. Exquisite.

After rewarding himself with several deep breaths, Hannibal carefully placed the paper into a small box, all the better for preservation, and turned to the issue of Bedelia.

Though he never lied to Will, Hannibal had not been entirely honest regarding methods to contact Bedelia Du Maurier. It was true that she did not have a telephone. She did however have a speaker crystal, which might have occurred to Will had the human been less

exhausted. The crystals were not very common outside of the Realms as a rule, the presence of iron disrupted the spell too substantially, but within Wonderland they were plentiful.

Hannibal activated his personal crystal with a few muttered words.

“Hannibal, this is unexpected,” Bedelia answered after a moment. Her voice sounded cautious but pleased, she knew Hannibal very well after all.

“My apologies, I should like to say this is merely a social call. Unfortunately it relates entirely to your former profession,” he explained.

“I do not take patients, Hannibal.”

He noted the chill in Bedelia’s voice and filed the slight away to be revisited at a later date.

“And yet I must impose upon you,” he said. “There is a security officer from Wonderland in great need, and there is no one better than you, Bedelia.”

“It’s unlike you to appeal to vanity,” She replied.

“Should I have appealed to friendship instead?” Hannibal countered. The answer interested him enormously, Bedelia was one of the few individuals for whom he felt great respect. The length and intimacy of their acquaintance implied friendship, certainly, but neither had ever expressed a relationship of that kind.

“I have some availability this evening,” Bedelia said after a long pause. Hannibal supressed a thrill of interest at the skill with which Bedelia circumvented his question.

“Excellent, I shall bring Officer Graham and a light super too to show my gratitude,” he confirmed.

“I look forward to meeting him.”

Hannibal tucked away the speaker crystal and pulled his recipe cards our from their cabinet, ideas for super already forming.

A Dream

Will stood frozen amongst trees that dripped blood, trapped in a forest of thorns and bones. Torn flesh hung in long, hideous ribbons all around him, sprouting like a disgusting parody of living plants. Everything oozed black and crimson fluids while the air was rancid with decay. Will had never seen or smelled anything as wretched.

It seemed endless. A sea of horror in a charnel house world that stretched in every direction for as far as he could see. Something howled in the distance, the angry scream of a trapped animal, and Will tried to run. But his feet, bare and pale and strangely pristine against the gore painted ground, wouldn't move no matter how much he willed it.

A shape passed through the trees to his left, moving silently as it picked a path towards Will. A stag, or something made to look like one. The thing was black from nose to hoof with a rack of antlers that rose to dangerous points. Something that looked like a ruff of feathers sprouted from its chest and shoulders, finishing with a trail down its spine.

It was obscenely out of place as it approached. Calm and commanding and impossibly clean despite the gore surrounding them both. Will tried to feel afraid but found himself filled with curiosity and, strangely, a sense of comfort instead. The stag was no more a part of this bloody world than he was.

Beyond the trees the howling scream sounded again, and the stag's ears flickered. It paused for a moment, head tilting, and he could almost imagine recognition in its black gaze.

"H-hello?" Will ventured. The stag snorted and drew closer, until its massive form towered over Will.

It was so close he could see the oily sheen of colour that danced over its fur and feathers, the mist its hot breath raised in the air. He reached out a trembling hand but couldn't quite bring himself to touch it. His hestiation didn't matter, the stag surged, its huge bulk lunging suddenly forward and pressed its nose into Will's palm. Then, grossly, obscenely, around it. The body, which had seemed so solid, felt like cold slime. Its black flesh rolled over him like a flood released from dam to envelope his hand first, then inexorably up his arm and across his chest.

Will opened his mouth to shout as the wave of blackness began to drown him. He gasped and choked as it filled his mouth and covered his eyes. Then he fell, and landed with a hard jolt on the floor next to his bed.

"Shit, shit, shit," he whispered, heart pounding in his throat. "It's…it's 2:54pm. I'm in Wolf Trap, Virginia. My name is Will Graham."

Despite his earlier scepticism, Hannibal's grounding technique actually seemed to work. The nightmare faded with each panted word as he lay back on the cool wooden floor and waited for the adrenaline to pass.

Will managed a brief moment of calm before he was disturbed by a furred muzzle that snuffled across the side of his face, cold and wet and unwelcome. He groaned and rolled to his feet tin time to stop the perpetrator, Winston, from licking at his sweaty hair.

The air in the bedroom was ripe with night terrors and he wedged a window open on the way to the bathroom, blinking at the afternoon sun.

“Still looking like hell,” he muttered to himself, catching sight of his pale, hollow-eyed appearance in a mirror. A bloom of greyish foxing on the surface covered the lower part of his face and he startled, thrown back to the dream and the sensation of drowning in flesh for an instant before he recovered. “My name is Will Graham. I am not crazy.”

In the shower Will did his best to sluice away the last traces of the nightmare and made sure to rinse down twice, keeping Hannibal in mind as he passed over the cheap woodsy body wash in favour of plain soap.

He’d barely wrapped a towel around his waist when he heard his cell ring in the bedroom and jogged to answer with the cloth clutched tightly at his hip.

“Hello?”

“Will, I hope I didn’t wake you,” Hannibal said.

“No, I was up already, I’m just getting dressed,” Will replied and made a face at his wardrobe as he tried to remember which clothes were freshly laundered.

“Perfect, in that case I have wonderful news; Bedelia has agreed to see you today at 5pm.”

“Right, I mean that’s good. Obviously,” Will said. He despised the idea of having his head examined almost as much as knowing that there was something wrong. For a second or two he considered telling Hannibal about the dream.

“You sound a little shaken Will, is everything well with you?” Hannibal asked, voice soothing and concerned. Will opened his mouth to explain everything was fine, then closed it again.

“I didn’t sleep well,” he replied lamely, then changed the subject. “So which Realm Gate should I head to so I can make it to Bedelia’s for 5pm? Is the Underhill Passage near Wonderland ok? I’ll need to pick up a pass from the security office anyway.”

Hannibal was silent for a moment. “You will travel as my guest, which negates the need for a travel pass. Unfortunately the Underhill Passage is quite unsuitable, ideally we should use either the Shenandoah Trees or Silver Bell Gate.”

Will hummed, he’d visited the Realms a few times over the years but only ever on official business. Usually even in the company of fey a pass was required, it guaranteed safe passage and held a tracing spell that enabled wearers to find their way back to their gate of origin. Space and time worked very differently in the Realms, a lost human was a dead one. “Confident I won’t wander off?”

“Perhaps more confident in my ability to find you, Will, in case you do,” Hannibal replied and Will snorted, it wasn’t an unfair assessment.

“Well, it’s pretty much equal distance between the two from Wolf Trap,” he said. “So whichever works for you.”

“Shenandoah Trees then. Would you be amenable if I picked you up? I will be driving from Baltimore, and Wolf Trap is practically on the way.”

The offer took Will by surprise and he glanced at the phone in his hand sharply, mind conjuring the image of a crown of shadow antlers imposed over Hannibal’s head. “I – uh-“

“I have made you uncomfortable,” Hannibal sounded…disappointed maybe? It was difficult for Will to get a read on the fey over the phone. “Forgive me, that was not my intention. The approach to Shenandoah can be a little tricky, the guardians there are somewhat unorthodox and prone to entertainment at the expense of unwary travellers. They will be better behaved in my presence.”

“No, that sounds…great,” Will lied and rattled off his address. “I have a boundary ward, nothing fancy but I’ll need to come get you once you hit the fence line.”

“Wonderful, then I shall see you at four fifteen,” Hannibal said.

They said their goodbyes and Will turned back to the task of dressing. He’d never cared much for his appearance beyond comfort and it showed in the options available.

Eventually he decided clean was more important than stylish, and resigned himself to a blue plaid shirt that still smelled like detergent and his best grey slacks. He paired the outfit with a sports jacket, with his glasses on the whole thing looked more college professor than mall cop.

The whole thing was passable. And Will was going to Bedelia du Maurier’s for ‘treatment’ anyway, it wasn’t like he needed a suit.

By the time he’d made some coffee, picked up his paper and looked after the dogs it was almost four pm. Will flicked through a few pages of news with disinterest before a picture caught his eye. Sarah-Jayne Lopez smiled up at him with the word ‘Missing’ emblazoned under her picture. The report was short, listing her name, age and appealing for any information on her location.

But there was one thing very wrong, it listed her last known location as a bus station near Baltimore and made no mention of Wonderland at all. Will tore the page free with a frown. He read it again, then once more, to be certain he hadn’t missed anything. Just how much influence did the management board at Wonderland have if they could manipulate a missing person appeal?

The ward chime, altering Will to a non-human visitor, pinged in the distance and he folded the article into a neat square to tuck into his wallet; he had some questions for Jack Crawford.

Hannibal's car was a perfect match for the man. The classic Bentley exuded wealth, luxury, and power in a way that affirmed Will's suspicions regarding Hannibal's standing in the fey community as more than a well-regarded restaurateur. Will still itched to know exactly what Hannibal was though, and had to bite back the question as he welcomed him.

"It's not much of a place," Will said, gruff and awkward as he commanded the dogs to stay put.

"Your home is quite charming, though I am a little surprised by the isolation," Hannibal replied. His easy confidence settled around Will like a cloud. "There are few humans willing to live outside of the cities, where the borders are less well defined, I have found."

Will scratched the back of his neck, ignoring the warmth spreading in his face for all he was worth. "I have my dogs, and the agent described the wards as 'reassuringly expensive'."

Hannibal glanced at Will's little pack and smiled slightly. "A fearsome pack."

"Let me grab my wallet and we can get going," Will said. It was infinitely easier to busy himself with a task than watch Hannibal examine his shabby belongings. "Do I need to bring anything extra with me?"

"No, everything has been worked out."

Will wasn't sure what to make of the response. He knew Hannibal had pulled some strings, now he couldn't help but wonder just how far the fey had gone. A prickle of unease itched between his shoulders at the thought.

"Worked out?" He parroted, following Hannibal back to his car.

He was treated to an indulgent glance. "Yes, I've committed to provide supper. Bedelia is something of a gourmand."

Whatever Will meant to reply was lost as he slid into the passenger seat of the Bentley. However plush and sophisticated the outside of the car appeared was nothing compared to the remarkable luxury within. Will would never describe himself as a car guy, boats were far more his thing, but he practically sank into buttery leather and had to clench his fingers into fists to avoid stroking the detail panelling.

"Wow."

If Hannibal noticed Will's awe, then he ignored it. They made idle conversation on the drive to Shenandoah Trees, Hannibal eventually regaling Will with stories of elaborate dinners and strange recipes. Apparently kelpie was the most difficult meat to work with, requiring brining and exposure to equinox moonlight, in combination with a number of unusual herbs, before the natural toxin of the flesh was rendered inert. Hannibal described the final outcome as 'hardly worth the considerable effort' and expressed significant disdain at the recent dining trend for the Scottish delicacy.

Will felt the tension in his body ease as the miles passed. There was something disarming about Hannibal's easy charisma and the comfort of warm leather seats. By the time they turned into the Gate station he'd almost forgotten the bleeding red nightmare and Sarah-Jayne Lopez's smiling face.

Shenandoah Trees was a surprisingly basic Gate station, if it wasn't for the sign and a small border guardian's cabin at the far side of the gravel car park then he might have mistaken it for a picnic spot. Will had expected something similar to Underhill passage, with its vast parking structure and friendly guardians who greeted people as they wandered amongst food vendors. There were no vendors at Shenandoah and few vehicles, it wasn't even clear exactly where the specific crossing entrance might be.

"Seems…rustic," Will said as he climbed from the car.

Hannibal hummed in agreement. He unloaded two small coolers from the trunk of the Bentley, one of which he handed to Will. "It's been some time since I travelled here, but I too expected a livelier reception. Perhaps it is the time of day."

Will shrugged and followed Hannibal towards the border cabin, examining the forest around them. There was the same electric feeling in the air that he'd come to associate with Gate stations, but this time none of the crowds he'd always thought were the cause.

An article Will had come across a few years ago described Gates as 'thin places', natural weaknesses in the walls between the different Realms where fey, humans, and other species, could walk between worlds. It had made for an interesting read, though the author included a bizarre single realm theory. Something to do with the idea that the Realms had all been one at a certain point in the past, split apart by some kind of catastrophic event in the past.

Regardless of what he thought of the later part of the article, the space in Shenandoah Trees certainly felt 'thin'.

"Welcome to Shenandoah Trees, please present your passes."

There was a single guardian at the desk, with the tell-tale stone teeth of a troll hidden behind her polite smile. Will was surprised; trolls were a rare fey species and very dangerous. They were renowned for their aggressive territorialism. He was fairly sure none of the Realm Gates he'd visited previously, including the Shade Gate back in New Orleans, were under troll guardianship.

"That won't be necessary," Hannibal replied. "I am Dr Lecter, with my guest Officer Graham. I spoke with you earlier."

The troll's smile faded slightly before returning with forced vigour. "Yes of course, then please go ahead sir."

Curious, Will reached to test her emotions and recoiled. Anxiety, touched with fear and possibly awe too. The troll was deeply worried by the prospect that she might offend Hannibal.

“Just how important are you in the fey community?” He whispered as they stepped back outside.

“More infamous than important, I’m sure,” Hannibal said, teeth very white and sharp as he smiled.

Will bit back his retort and walked towards the narrow path where the Gate crossing point lay, surprised when Hannibal took hold of his arm.

“It’s important we stay in physical contact during the crossing,” Hannibal explained. “And be wary that we do not become separated, there was more than one guardian here during my last visit. Trolls are not discerning when they hunt.”

Acutely conscious of the warmth of Hannibal’s palm, and sickened by the prospect of his own sudden, crunchy death, Will nodded mutely. Together they stepped onto the crossing path.

A Journey

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait!

Also, massive thank you for the wonderful art from jazzy2may
https://archiveofourown.org/users/jazzy2may/pseuds/jazzy2may

Please see the cover created here! https://archiveofourown.org/works/16373549?view_adult=true

Hannibal did not enjoy crossings. The sensation of passing between Realms was uncomfortable; fluctuations in magical energies itched inside his bones, frayed the edges of his glamour and dulled his senses. The distraction and vulnerability were unpleasant when he travelled alone, and rather worse with an empath at his side. After all, for all intents and purpose Hannibal had sworn safe passage to Will, an otherwise unprotected and gifted human. Oaths were not a small thing to the fey.

And then there was the matter of the troll. Hannibal generally disliked trolls. Trolls were not edible, their stone and grit bodies useless for anything but macabre decoration once life ceased, and their manners were atrocious.

They made passible guard dogs, he supposed, and he'd never been troubled by the pair in Shenandoah previously. But the species were unpredictably vicious and as like to bite their owner's hand as not. In another age they'd been treated as vermin and practically wiped out, more than a few by his own hands. He'd been quite unable to resist taking a firm hold on Will when he recognised the second scent drifting from the woods.

So tempting, his Will.

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When he'd been a kid Will imagined crossing between the Realms as a magical experience, something involving coloured lights or enormous carved wooden doors. But like a lot of things about adulthood, the reality was much less exciting and varied from place to place dramatically depending on where and how the Gate had formed.

In keeping with the apparently rustic theme and name, the crossing path at Shenandoah Trees was just a simple dirt track that ran between a pair of white oaks which had, through time or magic or accident, grown into one tree with limbs conjoined to form a natural arch about fifteen feet tall. The track beneath was very narrow and lush with moss, and pressed from

each side by barely tamed undergrowth. When he glanced over his shoulder Will noticed that the cabin and cars were already out of sight, consumed by leafy branches.

It was picturesque but he didn't dare stop and admire it, not with Hannibal glued to his arm.

The fey man was uncharacteristically tense. So much so that Will couldn't help but absorb some of the tension, his muscles growing tight. They walked in silent step perhaps fifty feet or so before the crossing took effect; a subtle change rippling through the trees and an earthier, richer scent in the breeze. Will breathed deeply and relaxed mental walls pressing back his empathy by the slightest amount to better acquaint himself with the sounds and sensations of this particular Realm.

"Officer Graham," Hannibal spoke softly against Will's ear but he startled anyway, snapping his mental walls back in place. "There are five rules for any human walking the fey Realms, do you recall them?"

Will frowned but dutifully listed them. "Uhh, never accept food or water, always travel after dawn and before dusk, never give your full name, offer gifts and not thanks… and I think the last is to refuse any offer to dance. Why?"

"There are two additions I would like you to make to that list for the duration of this trip; guard your gifts closely and do not, no matter how tempting, no matter what you hear, look behind you while outside of Bedelia's home." Hannibal said, his grip on Will's arm momentarily tighter.

"Don't look… is there a Bloodybones here?" Will asked, a little spooked by the thought.

Bloodybones were a subcategory of forest fey, invisible predators who stalked their victims on country roads and hiking paths. They were totally harmless unless the intended victim made the mistake of looking over their shoulder, at which point they became one hundred percent deadly. Luckily they were also exceptionally rare in North America, he'd only encountered one once in New Orleans and would have suspected the missing girls were Bloodybones fodder if not for the distinct lack of remains from which the creatures took their name.

"Amongst other, more dangerous, things," Hannibal replied. Will couldn't help the brief thought that perhaps Hannibal was one of those more dangerous things.

Disturbed, he hardly noticed the path ending until they emerged from the trees; not into a gravel lot but a wide glade where a rider and horses idled. All were adorned with an elaborate crest of a horned owl with scroll beneath its feet embroidered in gold over a blue background, a colour that blushed through the rider's mottled skin.

"Well met," Hannibal called out. He continued in a language Will couldn't speak but recognised as Sidhe. It wasn't spoken as often in Wonderland as some of the other non-human languages but shared enough base words with common fey that he followed the enquiry about transport.

The rider's answer was guttural, his blue lips revealing sharply pointed teeth that were not designed for speech. He gestured sharply to the horses, then to Will. His meaning was obvious and unwelcome.

"Hannibal…" Will searched for an inoffensive way to describe how much he didn't want to ride a fairy horse when he could hardly ride a real one.

"Would you be amenable to sharing a saddle, Officer?" Hannibal asked, cutting Will short. His face was set in a perfect picture of polite indifference as, for the second time, he avoided using Will's name. "It would be unfortunate indeed if a spirited horse brought you harm. I find myself quite unwilling to be made an oath breaker by happenstance."

Will managed to nod in response, unsure whether the words trapped behind his clenched teeth were grateful or angry. Only his sense of Hannibal's emotions kept him from speaking out; the growing tension twisted with something primal and predatory that was distinctly inhuman. It was a stark reminder of how little he really knew the man, if he could even be called that.

"I have become a stranger in a strange land," Will muttered and passed the small cooler he'd dutifully carried from the car to Hannibal. He clambered gracelessly onto the back of the nearest horse, red faced as Hannibal mounted with ease behind him.

"The Realms make strangers of us all," Hannibal said, voice low. His arms circled Will to both take the reins and secure the pair within the saddle; but did nothing to cool the heat in Will's cheeks. He shifted, uncomfortable and embarrassed and filled with regret for agreeing to visit Bedelia in the first place, then shuffled again before the arm at his waist tightened warningly.

Objectively there was only a moderate difference in size between Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter; a few inches in height, some thickness in build. But Will felt suddenly very much smaller and more vulnerable. Muscle, not apparent under Hannibal's carefully tailored clothes, pressed against his back and middle. It was discomfiting.

"I hope you will forgive the imposition," Hannibal murmured against Will's ear. "The distance to Bedelia's home is not great, and yet I sense that we are better to not be parted on the journey."

"One of those ' knowings'?" Will replied, remembering Hannibal's remarks the previous day about his decision to open a restaurant in Wonderland. It was a question soon forgotten though; the horse lurched beneath him, kicked into a trot, and staying seated became far more important than holding conversation.

If Hannibal spoke again Will couldn't recall it. It turned out he wasn't a natural horseman by any measure and it took every ounce of stubborn concentration in his body to work out the least painful way to stay in the saddle. By the time they crested the small hill that revealed a sprawling estate ahead Will was ready to have his feet back firmly on the ground.

Bedelia Du Maurier's home was extravagant by mundane standards, all white walls, tall windows and elegant gardens. It might have looked at home in the Italian countryside, but in

the wild woods of the Realms it was alien. The only practical aspect was the stone walls they passed, protected by sturdy gates reinforced with the kind of ward work Will couldn't have afforded in a lifetime. And the moment they closed he felt the arm around his waist loosen.

"Any chance I can get down now?" He asked. Hannibal's thoughtful hum rumbled against Will's back, the terrible, predatory tension turning to amusement. "In a few moments, of course."

That at least was true, almost the moment they drew level with the main door Hannibal reigned the horse and slipped from the saddle to offer Will his hand. Will eyed it and huffed. "Horses, it had to be horses."

"My apologies, Officer Graham," a cultured, feminine voice said, "I'd forgotten how few humans ride now. I'll make other arrangements for your return."

Will half fell in surprise; Hannibal's hand was the only thing that prevented him from planting face first into the ground.

Bedelia appeared to be a beautiful woman, blond and elegant, and dressed impeccably in the same deep blue as her crest. But appearance was all it was. Will had seen that face before, drawn in perfect likeness in one of the books piled in his office, and spoke before he stop his lips from moving. "You're a Sibyl."

Two perfect eyebrows raised slightly. "And you appear to have a malignant curse squatting in your psyche, we all have our crosses to bear."

"A curse?" Hannibal asked, greeting Bedelia with a kiss to the back of her hand. "Then I was correct to seek your expertise. You look quite radiant, my dear."

"Hannibal," Bedelia smiled, her eyes warming. The expression prickled at Will for reasons he was unwilling to explore. "Thank you, I find the air here very agreeable."

"Yes, though perhaps the neighbours less so?"

The pleasantries continued as they were escorted inside, a servant appearing to take the two coolers and their coats. Will hesitated for a moment. He was about to enter the home of a Sibyl, and not one of the human imitations that claimed to see the future or sold useless spells. Although he'd only skim read the chapter on Sibylline women it had been clear they were psychic powerhouses. There were five known to exist. And while they weren't immortal in body, they absolutely were in spirit; something to do with reincarnation and phoenix-like rebirth.

Suddenly fear, bone chilling and stomach churning, curled in Will's chest. He felt the world tilt strangely and saw viscera covered trees begin to sprout from the ground beneath his feet. The red world rose, like a waking nightmare, surrounding him with gore while something roared in furious defiance in the distant. He tried to shout, to struggle, to do anything but pant and shake.

It could have been an instant or an hour before the stag found him, locked in place by terror that wasn't his own. It appeared in a dark haze between one breath and the next, the massive head filled his vision, breath warm on his face. "Will?"

He blinked. The stag and red world blurred for a moment.

"You are Will Graham, it is 5:17pm and you are in the home of Bedelia Du Maurier. Are you with me Will?"

Could stags speak now? But there was something else, a scent. And warmth too, a familiar hand on the back of his neck. Will blinked again and this time it was Hannibal's face that swam into view. The red world trembled, blood fading and trees curling inwards until they shattered around him. "H-Hannibal?"

He was laying down, he realised, on some kind of chaise with Hannibal kneeling at his side. He tried to sit up but was held back by a hand on his chest.

"Stay still for a moment, Will," Hannibal commanded. "Now repeat; your name is Will Graham, it is 5:17pm and you are in the home of Bedelia Du Maurier."

"My name is Will Graham, its 5:17pm and I'm in the home of Bedelia Du Maurier," he parroted back, head pounding with the sound of his own pulse. "It… it happened again, didn't it?"

Maroon eyes searched his with something like concern and Hannibal nodded. "Indeed, perhaps in reaction to Bedelia's presence."

Will swallowed hard and looked away, jaw working. "No, I think it happened while I was at home too. I – I thought it was a nightmare," he admitted. Fear, real fear and not the sensation forced on him by the curse or whatever was stuck in his head, sat in the back of his throat like a lead weight. Only the feeling of Hannibal's hand on the back of his neck seemed to keep him afloat.

"I am confident in Bedelia's abilities," Hannibal replied after a long moment.

"How reassuring," Bedelia said from the doorway, she was holding a tray covered with a monogramed cloth. "But I make no guarantees of success until I'm a little more familiar with the problem. Every curse is unique in its own way after all."

As she passed Hannibal to put the tray down he drew back from Will, rising to sit nearby. Will missed the contact immediately and frowned.

"There's something else, I don't think it's part of the curse or, I don't know, whatever this problem is," he said. "There's a stag or at least it looks like mostly like a stag. It helps me. For the most part anyway."

Will didn't see the sharp look that Bedelia cast at Hannibal.

"Sometimes the mind seeks to protect itself," Hannibal replied. "Perhaps the stag is a manifestation of that protection."

It was as good a reason as any, he supposed, and he hummed in agreement.

“There are many possibilities, but let’s begin,” Bedelia said, she took a seat next to the head of the chaise, a small bell in her hand. Her voice dropped in pitch slightly and took on a compelling timbre.

“You are safe here, and comfortable. I will ring this bell three times, on the first ring you will feel more relaxed, on the second you will begin to open your shielding and on the third ring you will be completely open and completely relaxed, safe and comfortable…”

***

Hannibal watched with interest as Bedelia went about her work, watched as Will’s beautiful gifts blossomed from behind falling mental shields.

He saw too the thread of his own magic within Will’s shielding, grown so large already from the pinprick of his blood added to the breakfast Will had sullenly consumed in Wonderland. It was pleasing to both his eyes and instinct.

The curse was abhorrently ugly by comparison, a tangle of barbed filaments that pulsed with negative intent. Hannibal would take the caster’s eyes last, he decided, they would have to be made to see how one made real art.

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